

Message Text

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62

ACTION EA-14

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INR-10 L-03 NSAE-00 NSC-07 PA-04 RSC-01 PRS-01 SP-03

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FM AMEMBASSY VIENTIANE

TO SECSTATE WASHDC 9099

INFO AMEMBASSY SAIGON

AMEMBASSY BANGKOK

AMEMBASSY PARIS

LIMITED OFFICIAL USE VIENTIANE 4060

E.O. 11652: N/A

TAGS: ETRN

SUBJECT: PROPOSED RAILROAD TO NORTH VIETNAM

1. GOVERNMENT SPOKESMAN OUDAY SOUVANNAVONG REVEALED MAY 16 THAT THE PGNU HAS DECIDED TO REVIVE PLANS FOR A RAILROAD BETWEEN THAKHEK AND TAN AP IN NORTH VIETNAM. THE NEW LINE WOULD FOLLOW A PATH THROUGH MU GIA PASS ONCE PLANNED BY THE FRENCH BEFORE WORLD WAR II. OUDAY SAID THE PGNU HAS ORDERED THE APPROPRIATE GOVERNMENT DEPARTMENTS TO REQUEST THE RELEVANT PLANS AND DOCUMENTS FROM THE FRENCH GOVERNMENT, AND WILL ALSO MAKE CONTACT WITH HANOI TO FACILITATE THE OPENING OF THE RAIL LINE TO NORTH VIETNAM AND THE SOUTH CHINA SEA.

2. COMMENT: WHILE LAOS HAS LONG BEEN SEEKING ALTERNATIVE OUTLETS TO THE SEA TO AVOID TOTAL DEPENDENCE ON THE ROUTE THROUGH THAILAND WITH ITS HIGH TRANSPORT CHARGES, IT HAS GENERALLY BEEN ASSUMED THAT ANY NEW ROUTES THROUGH SOUTH OR NORTH VIETNAM WOULD BE ALL-WEATHER HIGHWAYS FOR USE BY HEAVY TRUCKS. THE CONSTRUCTION OF A RAILROAD WOULD INVOLVE HIGH COSTS IN THE IMPORTATION OF CONSTRUCTION AND MAINTENANCE EQUIPMENT, RAILS, AND ROLLING STOCK, PLUS THE TECHNICAL EXPERTISE REQUIRED SINCE

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LAOS HAS NEVER HAD A RAILROAD OF ITS OWN. CONSTRUCTING A RAIL-

ROAD THRU THE HEARTLAND OF THE HO CHI MINH TRAIL WOULD REQUIRE NVN APPROVAL WHICH WE DOUBT WOULD BE FORTHCOMING AT THIS TIME WITHOUT CONSIDERING THE COSTS WHICH NO DOUBT WILL BE CONSIDERABLE. MOREOVER ASSUMING NVN WOULD AGREE AND FUNDS WOULD BE AVAILABLE, AN ASSUMPTION NOT WARRANTED, CONSTRUCTION WOULD TAKE A MINIMUM OF AT LEAST THREE YEARS. THIS INTEREST IN FINDING AN OUTLET THROUGH NVN, EVEN IF ILL-CONCEIVED, IS ANOTHER GOOD ILLUSTRATION OF ACTIVE LAO SEARCH FOR AN ALTERNATIVE TO WHAT THEY CONSIDER A THAI STRANGLEHOLD ON THEIR SUPPLY LINE.

WHITEHOUSE

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NNN

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